

Interview with Frances Dixon

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

FRANCES DIXON

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

Initial interview date: March 19, 1986

Q: This is Jewell Fenzi interviewing Frances Dixon on March 19, 1986, at my home in Washington, DC. Frances has kindly offered to record the first interview for the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History program. She is a great friend, we've known each other since the mid-1960s in Morocco, and I'm delighted to be talking with you today, Frances. I'd like to ask what posts have you served in other than Morocco?

DIXON: Thailand - Bangkok, Pakistan - Karachi, and for a short time in Paris. We served in Morocco twice, first in Rabat, later on we went to Tangier, a total of six years.

Q: How nice, my favorite country. Then you were at Carlisle Barracks, and then at the UN

DIXON: After the UN we returned to Washington and Ben was with the Coast Guard. Before that, he was on the Australian desk in the Department.

Q: Oh, you had a varied career. When did you enter the Foreign Service?

DIXON: In 1949. From the Marine Corps, Ben had joined General Marshall's staff. From there he entered International Conferences, and from that he was Wristonized [Wristonized - High level civil servants were integrated to further incorporate the post-

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World War II bureaucracy in Washington, DC into the Foreign Service]. Ben retired in the late 1970s.

Q: That was a long career.

DIXON: Yes. He served with the Coast Guard for about five years as a POLAD [Political Advisor] officer. He was the first foreign affairs adviser the Coast Guard had. Remember when the Russian was put back on the Russian ship when he was trying to defect. Well, the Coast Guard decided then they needed someone from the State Department, so Ben went to work for them then.

Q: That's a long and distinguished career. The first time you went overseas, did you go by ship, or fly? Did you have two little children in tow?

DIXON: The children were aged six and seven, and we sailed on the Independence to Algeiras, ferried over to Tangier, and then drove to Rabat.

Q: So you had the experience of being in first-class with two little children. (she laughs) Wasn't it lovely!

DIXON: Oh yes, it was lovely. Morocco had just achieved independence when we arrived. The first month we were at the Boulima Hotel. Everybody was there — you could walk down the hall and smell food cooking. Eventually we moved to a small apartment, then we found a house out in Agdal [residential neighborhood in Rabat]. Everyone was trying to find houses but the French didn't want to rent and were holding back. We enjoyed Rabat.

Q: And you enjoyed Tangier. Was that the only time that Ben was principal officer?

DIXON: Yes. He headed the political section in Rabat. They were still rioting and having various troubles when we first got to Rabat. I got caught in a riot one day. I was driving the car with Ruth Williams, whose husband was the administrative officer, returning from the commissary and on every road we encountered tremendous crowds. They would hit

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the car with sticks — they couldn't tell whether we were French or not. The mob were overturning cars. After locking the passengers in, they set fire to the cars. I kept turning around trying to find another road but always the mobs. Finally a French soldier came by and he told me which route would lead reasonably safely back to our apartment.

Q: Were any embassy people injured in those riots?

DIXON: No, fortunately not, but so many French people were massacred. It was terrible.

Q: I didn't recall that had happened in Morocco, as it had in Algeria — probably ten times worse.

DIXON: The transition in Morocco was probably a bit more “peaceful” than in Algeria.

Q: Let's leap ahead to Tangier. As you know, I've always admired the way you handled your role as the wife of the principal officer there, in what was a very difficult situation. How did you handle that? — because you had the community working with you.

DIXON: Well, I knew that the person who was causing all the difficulty had been difficult before, but I didn't tell anyone else that she was like that, and I was on my guard. Regrettably, she was a retired Foreign Service spouse who had caused a great deal of trouble in her Moroccan post, Casablanca. With her over developed imagination, for example, her gossip about one individual resulted in the woman getting a divorce. The consul general in Casablanca had requested that when she and her husband retire, they not come there; so instead they came to Tangier.

Q: What was her role after you left? Did your successor handle her as well as you did?

DIXON: Well, one of our successors just quit inviting them to parties at the consulate. She had falsely accused the consul of having an affair with one of his officers.

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Q: So your solution was, really, to work her into the community to the best of your ability — such as not giving her anything of great responsibility to do? What did you do?

DIXON: Well, I did ask her to help with the British Bazaar by calling people to bake cakes, for instance. Even then she caused me trouble. When our driver Mustapha and I went by to pick up a cake one of the young officer's wives had made, she apologized for not being “able to bring everything down.” After she and Mustapha made several trips up and down carrying boxes, I asked, “Where did all this come from? Why did you make so much?” She replied, “Well, I was told that you wanted all this.” Six cakes, she'd been told. This was news to me, of course. Understandably, the young wife was upset at having been told that the consul general's wife wanted her to make six cakes!

Q: These things may sound very, very trivial as we sit here relating them, but they're not trivial at the time you're living in a microcosm.

DIXON: That's right. I had no idea how many other people she had also misled.

Q: In Tangier, I believe you also had a difficult wife of the ambassador. You handled her very well, too.

DIXON: I think that was because of the distance between us - a nice three and a half hours. I never saw her too much. (both laugh) She was a foreign born spouse — I served with several ambassador's wives of foreign origin — and I think they felt they knew more than U.S. wives.

Q: Do you think some of that is just insecurity?

DIXON: It may be.

Q: I've often wondered, “Could I represent Bulgaria, for instance, if I were married to a ...” (she laughs) It must be hard for them.

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DIXON: Mrs. Cannon [Cavendish Wells Cannon was AEP to Yugoslavia (1947); EE/MP to Syria (1950); AEP to Portugal (1952); AET to Greece (1953) and AEP to Morocco (1956)], our ambassador's wife when we were in Rabat, was Austrian. She was very, very difficult but I grew to like her. I knew her also in Tangier, when she was an ex-ambassador's wife. I told her I wanted to pay a call. She said, "Oh no, you are head of this post and I'm coming to call on you."

Q: How interesting to have that role reversal. She showed herself to be a great lady.

DIXON: Yes. I'd always liked her although many people didn't. She was difficult but fair. She was a very nice lady.

Q: What do you think makes a good Foreign Service wife?

DIXON: I think you have to really like people and enjoy doing this kind of thing. I've seen husbands retire because the wives just couldn't stand it, didn't enjoy it at all. Fortunately, I enjoyed it.

Q: I think most of us did. I wonder if most of us still do, I don't know, there's such a change. The formalities, the calling cards, the calls, they had their place, didn't they.

DIXON: That's right, they did.

Q: How do people today make their contacts at embassies if they don't ...

DIXON: Don't call, and do that? I just don't know how they meet the people of the country when they don't try to help the ambassador's wife or the chief of mission and try to entertain and do things that may help their husband.

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Q: And if they're working in the embassy as switchboard operator, or a commissary manager, what happens to their ability after working an eight-hour day, and when they have children, to go out into the community?

DIXON: I don't know how they can do that.

Q: I don't think I could do it.

DIXON: Nor I. When we went overseas, the only thing a wife could do was teach. Ben did have a secretary who had no children, her husband was an FSO and she'd been in the Service, but they let her work because she was American.

Q: Let's go on to Bangkok.

DIXON: In Bangkok we had no trouble, I just loved it.

Q: I've never been to Thailand, tell me about your tour there.

DIXON: I just loved it, it was one of the nicest experiences I've ever had. They say that you either like that part of the world or you detest it, and I really loved Bangkok, I loved the people, just everything about it. The Thais are very sweet, nice people, they have a wall until you get to know them beyond a certain point. But it was delightful. Very little poverty, a happy country.

Q: A happy time, in a happy country.

DIXON: Yes.

Q: Did you [do] a lot of traveling while you were there?

DIXON: We went to Hong Kong quite a bit, I'd like to go back again.

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Q: Well, I think you should. Did you ever go around the world?

DIXON: En route to Bangkok we took a cruise ship out of San Francisco that put in at Hawaii, the Philippines, Japan, and finally Hong Kong on the President Line ships, then we flew to Bangkok. When we left Bangkok, we went the other way around, through Europe.

Q: Don't you think that ability to travel by ship was one of the enormous perks of the Foreign Service?

DIXON: Yes, the nicest thing. And I really enjoyed every minute of it. Well, there are some things about it — our daughter Mackie got amoebic dysentery at one post. She was more outgoing than our son Ben, she made friends right away. After about six months Ben did too and was having a grand time. Each of our posts had an American school, so they never attended a foreign school. That helped too, I think, for when we returned to the United States they were right where they should have been and there really wasn't an element of difference.

Q: I think that's very, very interesting. Let's say they're two young people who certainly benefitted from their Foreign Service experience. I attribute that primarily to your family relationship.

DIXON: I think you have to make it fun that you're going to a new place and that it's just going to be wonderful ...

Q: When you yourself (she laughs) are biting your nails.

DIXON: ... and make it a lark and take things with you that are familiar and all that.

Q: Each time we moved, one time my daughter Ruth would have first choice for her room, the next time Cammillo had first choice. That solved all the problem(laughing) of who got the biggest room and the best room.

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DIXON: That was a good way to work it.

Q: (still laughing) I didn't know any other way.

DIXON: Your children are well adjusted too.

Q: Well, thank heaven. But there again I attribute that to family and as you say, making the Foreign Service fun. Also, Frances, the drug business: our children were in Tangier with drugs. Drugs held no appeal to them, none.

DIXON: None at all.

(Telephone rings)

Q: Now let me ask you, did you ever, at any of your posts, have a Presidential or Vice Presidential visit?

DIXON: We had Vice President Johnson in Thailand.

Q: Tell me about it.

DIXON: He came to Bangkok, with Lady Bird, Eunice Shriver, and Jean Smith [sisters of then President John F. Kennedy]. He was just amazing. He got on a Thai bus and started hugging and patting all these people. The Thais don't like to be touched at all. After he'd got off the bus, some of the passengers were asked what they thought about it. One of them said that this farong — this big tall man — suddenly appeared on the bus and it was “just as if an elephant began to sing.”

Q: (both laughing) How great! And Lady Bird, I've always admired her.

DIXON: She was wonderful there too. The vice president was late everywhere he went, very late to the American Association luncheon at the hotel on the river, a beautiful setting.

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When he didn't come and didn't come, Lady Bird stood up and talked until he finally arrived. It was glorious the way she was able to talk and entertain people. She was lovely.

When we were in Karachi, Jackie Kennedy and her sister, Lee Radziwill, came. They rode elephants and went up to the Shalimar Gardens and all over Pakistan. At the end of her visit she drove by the embassy and we all had to be there to wave good bye to her. As she drove by, I could see why all the men thought she was so wonderful, the way she looked at the Marine guards as she drove by. She was absolutely charming, they couldn't have helped but like her. She arrived in Karachi in the midst of a terrible dust storm — your whole house would have a foot of dust in it. We'd all been told to wear long dresses to the reception, but as it turned out she decided to wear a short dress, so we all had to rush around and get into short clothes.

Q: Did she dictate that?

DIXON: She just said that she was wearing a short dress, so the ambassador's wife told us we should too. The Pakistani women were really disappointed that she wasn't more “dressed up.” They, of course, had on beautiful saris, and had looked forward to seeing her because of her reputation as such a well-dressed woman. She didn't wear much jewelry either, but they thought she was just great.

Bruce Laingen was escort for Lady Bird Johnson — no, I'm thinking about Karachi. David Linebaugh escorted Jackie Kennedy . (on reflection) I know that David Linebaugh did escort Jackie Kennedy because later on after he had that terrible accident — he was back in the U.S. on leave, was very tired, and was driving a Volkswagen down the wrong side of a road because he was used to driving on the left hand side. His car was struck and he was hit in the back of the neck, by the back seat, causing him to be permanently paralyzed — Jackie Kennedy read about it in the paper and got him admitted to NIH. He was so good looking, and he'd had the prospect of a wonderful career ahead of him. But he's never let the accident get him down, he's just remarkable.

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Q: How good of Jackie Kennedy to remember that she'd met him.

DIXON: I think the Johnsons came to Karachi before we got there, and Bruce was in charge.

Q: Your Pakistan tour overlapped with the Laingens.

DIXON: Yes.

Q: Tell us about your relationship with Barbara Hutton in Tangier.

DIXON: Well, one day when I answered the telephone a voice said, "This is Barbara Hutton, and I'd like to invite you and your husband for lunch." I thought it was a practical joker, so I said, "Well, I'll have to check first with my husband, then I'll get in touch with you." We discovered it really was she who'd invited us. She was married to the Laotian prince Doan na Champassek. He had recently been recognized as a prince, she wanted him to have a French passport to indicate that. He had lived in Morocco and was the son of a French woman and a Laotian father, I believe it was. Barbara Hutton was very nice. Ben asked if she would entertain the U.S. Mediterranean Fleet and she said yes, she'd be delighted to. She had two beautiful parties, one for the officers, one the next night for the enlisted men, both with champagne, smoked salmon, caviar, everything the best that you could have.

Q: You're telling me very nice things about these public figures. I'm so happy to hear them.

DIXON: She had belly dancers come to the parties. One night she and the enlisted men were all sitting around and one of them said, "You know, you sure do look better than I thought you were going to." (both laugh heartily)

Q: How did she take that?

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DIXON: She thought it was very amusing. And then they serenaded her when they left. She just loved everything like that. She was a very sweet, nice person, really, and she wasn't dumb. She was also generous. I think if she hadn't had so much money and had had a nicer childhood, she'd have been really an exceptional woman.

Q: Was she shuttled back and forth between ...

DIXON: Her father never wanted her, he wanted a boy — she told me all this — but when her mother committed suicide when she was four years old, nobody told her. She went off to school and some of her friends told her. She'd been told merely that her mother was dead but the child hadn't been told how it happened. Barbara Hutton just never had much of a childhood. Her father was very difficult. And then, later, making her debut during the Depression, they had that big costly party for her, which didn't set well with lots of people.

Q: When the rest of the country was on breadlines. But that wasn't her fault ...

DIXON: And then she had so many husbands — seven, but she always said Cary Grant was the nicest. He was the only one when they were divorced who didn't ask for any money at all. And he was very nice to her son, by her second husband who was killed. She had a lot of tragedy in her life but she was crazy about her father's ex-wife, Marjorie Merriwether Post, they were very close. Mrs. Post's daughter, Deena Merrill, is Barbara Hutton's first cousin (admits she's not exactly sure of this relation). Barbara Hutton was perfectly lovely. She never really looked her age.

Q: She also gave you a lovely present.

DIXON: A beautiful bag. She said it was too heavy for her to carry and she wanted me to have it. It was a beautiful bag and I still have it.

Q: The mirror she gave to Ben.

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DIXON: When she was about to leave Doan, she wanted to get rid of everything that reminded her of him ...

Q: Let's continue that charming tale about the mirror.

DIXON: The hand is about the size of a person's hand, and I wondered why it never needed polishing. I thought it was brass, until a friend of mine, Anne Sednaoui came up from Rabat to Tangier. She smelled the mirror and said, "Well, the reason why you don't have to polish it, Frances, is because it's gold." So then I took it to a jeweler, who said that it was gold.

*Q: How could Anne Sednaoui smell gold? Have you tried smelling gold since then?
(laughing)*

DIXON: Well, I guess it didn't smell like brass, maybe that was it. (both laugh) So I said, "Well, I'll just leave it on the table in the living room." Because nobody would think it was gold.

Q: Of course not. I remember seeing that, it's lovely. Do you know what the little poem says — it's in Arabic, I suppose.

DIXON: It's something about when she looks in the mirror, the beautiful blue eyes — something overly romantic and apparently in very bad Arabic. Then Barbara Hutton also gave us a painting. Doan was an artist, which is how they met — on a trip with some friends, I think it was to Fez, she thought he was very attractive. Later on he came to Tangier and brought her this painting of what he had imagined her parties were like. She used to have parties on the rooftops of her big house, very festive, with dancing girls and delicious food. So he painted this painting that we have in our library. She also gave Ben a huge brass Moroccan hand that had belonged to El Glaoui [El Glaoui - powerful tribal figure who sided with the French against Mohammed V, the first sultan after Moroccan

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independence in 1956], which had hung over Doan's bed. She wanted to get rid of all those mementos of Doan and just gave it to Ben.

Q: I remember that too, a huge thing, very beautiful. You had a lot of interesting people in Tangier, just a lot.

DIXON: There were interesting people.

Q: In addition to dealing well with your difficult former Foreign Service woman, you dealt very, very well with the gay community. You included them, you made no distinction.

DIXON: And they were all very nice.

Q: ... and talented.

DIXON: Especially the Englishman, David Herbert. He came from the Pembroke and Montgomery family. His mother was the Countess of the Pembroke and Montgomery families, their home in England is Wilton, and some of the furniture in the [National Gallery's recent exhibition in Washington,] "Treasure Houses of England" is from Wilton. There is a scrapbook in the exhibition about the Herberts.

Q: I remember going to a party at his house in Tangier.

DIXON: The head of the family who lives now at Wilton came on his honeymoon to visit David in Tangier, and Princess Alexandra came out with her husband — he always had lots of people like that visiting him.

Q: Didn't you find that when Ben was principal officer just everything came your way? (Dixon agrees) That was nice, wasn't it?

DIXON: Yes.

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Q: That's another reason I've wondered and have often felt sorry for the women who can't handle that — the dragon ladies of yesteryear whom you've encountered and there again handled very well. You were going to tell me, however, of your initial encounter as a young officer's wife with, well, let's just mention Mrs. Henderson.

DIXON: Mary Anne Stoessel had a tea in Georgetown for a group of new Foreign Service wives. We were told that when Mrs. Henderson came in we should all stand up. At that time her husband was deputy under secretary for Management. We knew that she was elderly, so when an elderly lady came in we all stood up, and she was lovely to us. A little bit later another elderly woman came in, and this time only a couple of other women and I stood up. The second lady was Mrs. Henderson; the first woman had been Mrs. Hickerson. Well, Mrs. Henderson sat down and started right off telling us how rude it was when people didn't stand up for an ambassador's wife, even though her husband was not an ambassador at the time. She told us that we should stand aside and let the ambassador's wife go in the door first, and never sit on the right-hand side of the sofa, and so forth.

Finally we were asked to come in to tea. The hostess asked Mrs. Henderson if she would pour — tea, I think it was — and she also asked Mrs. Hickerson, whose husband was an ambassador at the time, to pour. I've forgotten which is a bigger honor, to be asked to pour tea or to pour coffee. [Coffee is considered the greater honor.] As it happened, Mrs. Hickerson was asked to pour the more important beverage. Mrs. Henderson was absolutely beside herself. She spoke terribly to poor Mary Anne Stoessel, who had made this big faux pas in giving Mrs. Hickerson the bigger honor. Mary Anne went on to become wife of the ambassador to the USSR and also under secretary of State [Walter J. Stoessel Jr. had a long and distinguished Foreign Service career which culminated in his being Secretary of State ad interim in 1982.]. The party was in 1949, and at that time, of course, she was just a young wife who had been in the Service only somewhat longer than the young wives she'd invited to tea, at her house.

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Q: Oh! Mrs. Henderson had merely been invited to come? She wasn't there to instruct you?

DIXON: No. This was a party in a private home.

Q: And Mrs. Henderson took it upon herself to ...

DIXON: To correct everybody! (both laugh) But Mrs. Hickerson behaved very well, she didn't make any to-do about being called down because she was pouring the wrong thing. We must check on which is the bigger honor — to pour tea or to pour coffee. I think it is coffee.

Q: It seems to me that you got out into the community in Pakistan and Thailand and Morocco. Actually, you probably had a better time, and learned more about the country, than Ben did. He and Guido were always in the office with Economic affairs or Political affairs.

DIXON: That's right. One of the nicest things in Bangkok was that we worked with Jim Thompson, the man, you'll recall, who “discovered” Thai silk and put it on the market. He had a perfectly beautiful Thai house, he'd put three houses together. It really was a spectacular place — the furniture was all covered in Thai silk. He wanted to help the blind school, so he opened it several times each week to the public and tourists could see it. The house was on a klong and perfectly lovely. Embassy wives had the pleasure of showing people around who came to visit and to learn about Thai silk, which was woven across the klong from Thompson's house. A klong is a small river, and many klongs circulated among the houses in Bangkok. You could take a boat and ride by his house. An architect by profession, he went to Bangkok originally with the OSS. On returning to New York he showed some Thai silk to Diana Vreeland, editor of Vogue, and she said, “It's the most beautiful thing I've seen, how can you get more?” He went back to Thailand, which

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saw to it that the dyes were perfected. Thai silk is all around the world now, including at Buckingham Palace.

Q: You learned a bit about it through being a volunteer spouse? (reading from list of topics spouses might discuss) — your most outstanding experience... most frightening... most amusing ..."

DIXON: I think my "most frightening" was the episode in Rabat.

Q: "... coping with isolation and removal from U.S. mainstream..." Did you ever feel isolated in Pakistan?

DIXON: No, I never felt isolated.

Q: You always had one child with you at least, didn't you?

DIXON: Yes. They both were with us until Tangier and then Ben went to boarding school. You know, having children with you helps. You meet more people through them. In Rabat we lived alongside French and Moroccans and our children had friends among all sorts of children. It was really a wonderful experience. I've often thought that it would be harder for people without children.

Q: I think it is. (wondering if they've covered everything and saying it's time to break for lunch)

DIXON: Oh, once in Karachi — we were good friends of Pakistanis, Jimmy Fancy [phon. spelling] the very richest people there. I'm reminded of this because the Aga Khan was at the White House last night to dinner. The son, Karim, ahhh! I was always in love with him. (Fenzi laughs) Once when he came to his mother's house, next door to us, to meet Pakistani ladies, she said that she wanted me to come. Another Foreign Service wife, Ute Macuk and myself were the only foreigners there. It was so exciting, and he was charming.

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Q: He was invited to meet the women separately from the men?

DIXON: Yes. No other men were there. The women were all just thrilled. I was surprised they didn't stand up when he came in, the other wife and I stood up and spoke to him.

Q: (laughing) You were conditioned diplomatic wives. My daughter's recollection of the younger Aga Khan dates from about 1965 when she was 12, in boarding school in Switzerland. His chalet was next to theirs and the only thing she ever saw of him was his feet, because he'd sit and read and she could see his feet through the window.

DIXON: He got bald, recently. He married an English woman but I don't know if they're still married.

Q: How about "...representational entertaining..." Before I went to Freetown, I remember being told at the course at FSI that I must take my fish forks.

DIXON: I remember when we were new to the Foreign Service and Ben saw Johanna Moore at a party — I could have killed him! He said, "Frances has just been down to visit her mother and has come back with finger bowls, so now she's able to enter the Foreign Service." (both laugh heartily) But that's right, you did entertain that way.

Q: I didn't have any fish forks but I had some gold Italian fruit forks and knives and I used those as fish forks.

DIXON: I didn't have any either, and Mrs. Cannon when I was in Tangier said, [speaking in hushed tones] "You don't have any fish forks?" So when she left she gave me a whole dozen fish forks and knives and a fish service. (they break up in laughter again) She just couldn't believe I'd been in the Foreign Service all that time without fish forks. Things have definitely changed. I heard some time ago that a consul general was told that she either had to marry the man she had living with her in the residence or leave the post.

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Q: Do you think she would have been told to get married or move out if she were a man?

DIXON: I just wonder.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Ben F. Dixon

Entered Service: 1946Left Service: 1979

Spouse's position: Political Officer

Status: Spouse of Retired FSO

Posts: 1946-47Washington, DC 1947Atlantic City, New Jersey 1947-56Washington, DC 1956-58Rabat, Morocco 1959-62Bangkok, Thailand 1962-64Karachi, Pakistan 1965-68Tangier, Morocco 1968-70Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania 1970-71United Nations General Assembly, New York, New York 1972-79Washington, DC (Foreign Affairs Advisor to Commandant, US Coast Guard)

Place/Date of birth: Raleigh, North Carolina; February 25, 1920

Place/Date of death: Washington, DC; April 14, 1992

Maiden Name: Frances Leftwich McKee

Parents (Name, Profession):

James McKee, Insurance Company

Marguerite McKee

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Schools (Prep, University):

Peace High School and Junior College, Raleigh, North Carolina

Gunston Hall, Washington, DC

Date/Place of Marriage: May 3, 1947; Raleigh, North Carolina

Profession: Manager, Classified Advertising, Raleigh Times, Raleigh, North Carolina

Children:

Marguerite Dixon Ayres

Ben F. Dixon IV

End of interview